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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical overview of recent developments in parent group education and suggests a basic reorientation of both the principles and structures currently characteristic of the field. A framework designed to encompass the ecology of parent functioning is offered as a stimulus to broadening the view of parenting found in contemporary parent education offerings. Illustrating a continuum of organizational forms in the broad field of parent education, the discussion describes key dimensions of family life, traditional social service provision, and two intermediary levels of organization (family support services and para-familial groups/services). Finally, reflecting an ecologically based, holistic framework, a reconceptualization of the core content of parent education is proposed. (Author/RH)

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Education and Support for Parents:

A Challenge for Group Practice in the Coming Decade

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical overview of recent developments in parent group education and suggests a basic reorientation of both the principles and structures currently characteristic of the field. A framework designed to encompass the ecology of parent functioning is offered as a stimulus to broadening the view of parenting found in contemporary parent education offerings. Key dimensions of family life and traditional social service provision, as well as two intermediary levels of organization, are set out illustrating a continuum of organizational forms in the broad field of parent education. Finally, a reconceptualization of the core content of parent education reflecting an ecologically-based and holistic framework is proposed.

Education and Support for Parents:

A Challenge for Group Practice in the Coming Decade

Reviews of the distant and recent history of parent education in Canada and the United States have offered numerous definitions of parent education and parent group education (Croake and Glover, 1977; Fine, 1980; Harman and Brim, 1980; Pickarts and Fargo, 1971; Schlossman, 1976). The common elements of virtually all the definitions put forward by these reviews can be summed up as "structured or semi-structured programs or offerings for parents or parents-to-be designed to enhance their functioning as parents". This definition clearly covers a wide territory. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on groups designed for parents.

Historical Background

In North America, parent groups have a long and diverse history. The first documented parent groups were the "Maternal Associations" which met in the area of Portland, Maine, as early as 1815 to discuss such topics as "breaking the will of the child" (Brim, 1965). It can be noted how far we have come. Groups of mothers are currently meeting weekly in many parts of Victoria, British Columbia, to discuss such items as "how to keep the child from breaking the will of the parent!".

Times, however, have changed greatly over the past 170 years. The earliest groups were primarily based on religious and moral teaching and drew largely on the guidance of prayer and biblical texts. But it was not long before the participants in these groups along with the rest of the Western world were swept up in an "ideological revolution" of values and attitudes which erupted in the middle of the nineteenth century and has carried into our contemporary period. At the centre of this revolution,

a companion of the "industrial revolution", was a questioning of religious and moral values in the face of the impact of experimental science (Steere, 1964).

Berger (1974) has traced the dramatic societal transformations in the so-called "modern" era which have been profound in terms of both the outward manifestations in the social environment and the inward changes in the way in which individuals, families and communities perceive the world around them. Perhaps the most significant development of the modern era in relation to the evolution of parent education, in all its manifestations, has been the emergence and refinement of the "human technologies". By the term "human technologies" is meant all applications of technique to human (person-to-person) interaction, notably in such fields as medicine, education, social services and the mass media (Ellul, 1964). The rapid and all pervasive development of human technologies brought with it such now familiar phenomena as bureaucratic organization and professionalism. Ironically, in the field of social services as in the field of industry, what were created as solutions to perceived problems have now come to be viewed as problems themselves (Levin, 1981; Pitman, 1980; Howell, 1975).

Although the reasons for the current resurgence of interest in parent education are varied and complex, it has come to be a widely accepted view that the increasing need for parent education efforts has been a result of the combination of a failure of previous generations to effectively transmit the socio-cultural traditions down the generations and the growing inadequacy of these traditions for adequate preparation for contemporary life (Dinkmeyer and McKay, 1982; Gordon, 1970; Morris, 1977).

This paper seeks to provide a critical overview of recent developments in parent group education as a prelude to suggesting a basic reorientation of both the principles and structures currently characteristic of the field.

Current Parent Group Approaches

The field of parent group education can best be characterized as "a field with a thousand flowers blooming" (Anglin, 1984 (a)). A brief and partial list of parent groups documented in the recent literature includes:

- group services for learning disabled children and their parents (Gitterman, 1979)
- parent support groups for the families of mentally handicapped children (Holland, 1980)
- group work with abusive parents (Kruger et al., 1970)
- parenting classes for the mentally retarded (Madsen, 1979)
- group therapy with abusive parents (McNeil and McBride, 1979)
- parent and child education-support groups (Poultney and Hyman, 1981)
- group intervention with parents of children with cancer (Ross, 1970)
- training of families to be parent-therapists for severely emotionally disturbed children (Rubenstein et al., 1978)
- education and support for groups of parents of autistic children (Samit, 1980)
- situation/transition groups for parents sharing a stressful life event (Schwartz, 1975)
- life-coping skills for parents (Schumacher, 1980)

In general, the somewhat bewildering array of parent groups can be categorized by objectives and/or target groups. In terms of objectives, groups tend to fit one of the following categories:

Primarily informational

Primarily skill

Primarily support

Information and skills

Skills and support

Information and support

Information, skills and support

The characteristic target groups can be identified as:

Open to all parents

Defined by family/life stage

Defined by age of child(ren)

Defined by child/parent problem

Beyond objectives and target groups, parent group education has been characterized by wide diversity on virtually all other dimensions as well, including such aspects as auspices (agency sponsored. school-based, self-help, etc.), leadership (social workers, child care counsellors, parents, nurses, teachers, doctors, psychologists, etc.), and theoretical orientation (no specific approach, person-centered, Adlerian, developmental, family systems, transactional analysis, gestalt, etc.).

As one type of service in the spectrum of family support services, parent education has tended to be viewed as a "frill" or "add on" service that is "nice to do" if someone happens to have an interest in it and some spare time to devote to it. In the current environment of economic constraint, parent education is an easy target for financial cost-saving. This view of parent education has left the potential impact of parent education and support groups as a preventive service largely untested and two other important functions it could play, namely as complementary and supportive to the traditional system of family treatment and substitute care services, virtually unrecognized and undeveloped.

1. Preventive function: Parent education has been widely recognized and touted as a preventive service. To a large degree, its potential in this area has yet to be sufficiently demonstrated in a manner that will

capture the commitment and resources of professionals and bureaucrats, although politicians are generally more quick to pay lip service to its benefits due to the "face validity" of the proposition that parenting, one of the most demanding of tasks, is the one for which the education system traditionally gives the least direct preparation. Parent education and support groups are generally justified as offering an effective means of enhancing parental and/or family competence and functioning. The goal is to eliminate or reduce the possibility of children having to be removed from the home and placed in substitute care.

2. Complementary function: Parent groups are sometimes, although infrequently, used as a complementary service to more traditional and mainstream services. Professionals are increasingly recognizing the realistic limitations of traditional casework, counselling and therapeutic services and are coming to view parent group approaches as serving an important complementary function (Pancoast et al, 1983). This view sees parent education and support groups as serving a different and equally valid function from traditional services, rather than as an inexpensive substitute for more costly professional services. As well, parent groups have been used to complement substitute child care services. It is generally recognized that removing a child from the family to "fix" the child prior to reintegration into the family is a futile exercise without a systematic intervention that addresses simultaneously the dynamics of the family (and community) within which the child was seen as a disturbed or disturbing influence.

Given the theoretical soundness of this view, it is difficult to understand why parent education and support groups have not yet come to be seen as an integral part of a system of residential care services for children.

3. Supportive function: Perhaps the least acknowledged and developed aspect of parent groups is its potential as a supportive service for substitute parental figures, such as foster parents, group home parents and child care workers in residential institutions. Support of foster parents in their task of providing parenting functions is relatively well accepted, but there is as yet little recognition of the need for child care workers to be offered opportunities for such ongoing education and support.

One particularly interesting and promising model of parent education and support has been developed at the Chedoke-McMaster Hospitals in Hamilton, Ontario (Rubenstein et al., 1978). The program, termed the "Parent-Therapist Program", is basically a heavily resourced, sophistocated and ongoing parent education and support group. In this model, five families are formed into an extended family-like grouping which meets regularly with a high degree of professional input and support from psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists and child care workers. Each family takes on responsibility for the care of a severely emotionally disturbed child while accepting a secondary responsibility for the children placed in the other four families. The children so placed would otherwise be placed in residental institutions as treatment of choice.

Evaluations to date indicate that treatment outcome does not differ significantly from that of residential treatment, but that costs are about one-half.

Perhaps the most significant and widespread trend in the parent group field in the past 10 to 15 years has been the development of "packaged" programs. It has been noted that parent education is embedded in the socio-cultural movements which are continually evolving throughout the Western world

(Schlossman, 1976) and so this recent development can be seen to be in keeping with the emergence of sophisticated product packaging in virtually all areas of consumerism. As well, there is a fast-food flavour to some approaches. Reminiscent of the claims of one world-wide hamburger chain is the boast of Parent Effectiveness Training founder Thomas Gordon of "over 600,000 parents trained" (Fine, 1980). P.E.T. has been joined by S.T.E.P. (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) which also offers a highly polished and professionally designed and marketed package in the form of a "S.T.E.P. Kit" which contains audio-tapes, posters, leader guide and parent guides. The advantage of these packaged programs is that they are highly structured. Their disadvantage, similarly, is that they are highly structured. In order to be so highly structured, they have to make a great many assumptions about universal aspects of the parenting experience, adult learning, trainer abilities, relevant content, sequencing of content, appropriate group processes, and a great many more important areas. In the following discussion, the serious limitations of this approach as well as some cautionary notes will be discussed.

Limitations of Current Approaches

The enthusiasm of much of the parent education literature borders, at times, on implying that parent groups are unqualifiably good, and at the very least, are probably entertaining, sociable events that can't really do any harm. Several recent studies have called into question the benign nature of parent group approaches, and strongly suggest that parent groups can actually encourage the very behaviours they are seeking to reduce or eliminate.

Shain (1980) reports on an evaluation of a parenting skills program which was implemented in an attempt to assess the impact of enhancing parents' communication skills on the alcohol use of their children. It is important to note that this program utilized trained group leaders who implemented a

series of ten two-hour sessions over a period of ten weeks which were based largely on Gordon's parent effectiveness training content supplemented by other sources.

What the evaluation determined was that, in the words of the evaluator, "if mom and dad smoked and drank, it was more likely that their children would smoke and drink as communication improved" [emphasis added]. Conversely, if parents were abstinent, children were less likely to drink in circumstances where the skills taught in the course were practised. In addition to these effects on children of participants, the researcher noted that "there was some evidence that PCP [Parent Communication Project]could be DIVISIVE in families--e.g., where the mother came against the wishes of father (even though it didn't cut into evening-time, meal preparation, etc.). This divisiveness was reflected in children's perceptions of parents' behaviour--mothers becoming more accepting, fathers more rejecting. (. . . .) Several divorces or separate household arrangements may have been stimulated by attendance at the course" [emphasis in original] (Anglin, 1984 (b)).

Another researcher referring to a different program (Kagey, 1981), has also noted that "it is possible that the support groups had a negative effect on relationships with spouses." These observations ought to give us pause for reflection. With tens of thousands of parents, approximately 90% of whom are mothers attending on their own, being subjected to parent groups, it is incumbent on programmers to attempt to ensure that they "first, do no harm". It may well be that current approaches are indeed doing more harm to family life than good. However, few programs have even attempted to assess their effects in a manner that would bring forth such data. It is essential that such data be sought out in future evaluation efforts.

Further negative impacts of a more subtle nature have also been suggested. These impacts have to do with "laying on" expectations for one set of parents that, although functional for some parents, may in fact be dysfunctional for a set in different circumstances. For example, the recent research on family systems interaction has led some writers to set out preferred or ideal patterns of interaction that, it is suggested, are characteristic of "healthy" families (Grinker, 1967; Lingren et al, 1982; Steinhauer, 1983). Pill (1981), in reporting on a family life education group for stepparents observes: "the American family ideal of a happy family as a close-knit one, when transferred to a stepfamily situation may actually work to the disadvantage of healthy family functioning." Other research in the areas of social support and social networks (Gottlieb, 1981) and ethnicity (Mostwin, 1980) suggest the need to pay careful attention to local group, community, cultural and sub-cultural norms. The values, attitudes, perceptions, needs, modes of expression, behaviour, identity and definition of situations and problems of parents and families are all bound up intimately with their socio-cultural positions and processes of socialization. Again, the delicate and vitally important nature of these realities needs to be acknowledged and respected by anyone seeking to intervene into them. It is difficult to see how a packaged program disseminated in kit or franchise form can possibly address these sensitive issues in any but a superficial and token manner. The learning needs and processes of each individual parent must surely be taken into account if parent groups are to be provided or facilitated with a reasonable degree of integrity. Increasingly, commentators in the area of parent education and child socialization are expressing the need to take parent's perceptions as well as their behaviour into account in undertaking any form of intervention (Ammons, 1982; Boss, 1980; Caplan and Grunebaum, 1972; Gottesfeld, 1972;

Hill et al., 1982, Hoffman, 1980; McCubbin et al., 1980; Rutter, 1981; Satir, 1975; Simon, 1980; Tough, 1979; Wandersman, 1982; Wolins, 1974).

The serious questions concerning unintended negative outcomes and the need to be highly sensitive to the specific situations and needs of particular families and community groups combine to suggest a more personalized and individualized approach to parent education than can be offered by the packaged programs. As well, there is a growing recognition that the content elements of most parent offerings have, in relation to the realities of being a parent, been extremely narrow and relatively sterile and simplistic. Recent work in the area of "the ecology of human development" strongly suggests that much of the social science research upon which parent education has largely been based has been misguided, or, at minimum, reductionistic (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977, 1979; Garbarino, 1977, 1979, 1982). In addition to the work of Bronfenbrenner and Garbarino, many working in the field of family life are identifying the restricted, and restrictive nature, of much of the parent education content. Largely neglected aspects of parental and familial functioning that have been identified include socio-cultural and economic impacts (Clarke-Stewart, 1978, Giovannoni and Billingsley, 1970) school-home linkages (Zwick, 1974), parental work/jobs (Finch and Groves, 1980; Pleck, 1977; Renshaw, 1976), family and community networks (Cutler, 1980; Erickson, 1975; Gatti and Colman, 1976; Gottlieb, 1981; Speck and Rueveni, 1969), and the media (Elkin, 1971; Whitfield, 1981).

Although such observations are becoming commonplace, it is interesting that the literature on parent education is virtually devoid of attempts to provide a broad conceptual framework to encompass this myriad of variables and set of domains. It is doubtful that we will see much innovative development in the programming dimension until new conceptual frameworks

become visible and accepted as offering a richer perspective from which to design parent programs or packages. Figure 1 represents an attempt by the author to set out an encompassing framework. Its primary purpose is to open up how we as parent educators view the world of parenting.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The smallest circle in the centre of the diagram represents the individual parent, traditionally addressed in terms of his or her social, physical, cognitive, emotional and (sometimes) spiritual needs. Within the next larger circle surrounding the parent circle (A1 through L1) lie the significant individuals who interact with the parent in the familiar settings of day to day life. Each of these individuals is part of a larger system which is represented by sections A1 + A2 through L1 + L2. Finally, all of these persons and systems are embedded within a complex set of societal, ideological and cultural institutions and patterns. Traditional approaches to parent education tend to focus almost exclusively on the content of sectors A1 and B1 in relation to the individual parent and only occasionally giving fleeting attention to one or more of the remaining sectors or the relationships between them. If the true complexities and inter-relationships between sectors are taken seriously, we can no longer be satisfied with the majority of contemporary parent education programs and packages which recognize and address such a narrow spectrum of concerns.

Implications for Services

Parent education, embedded as it is in the broader societal patterns and developments, is equally the target of an observation made by Walter Pitman (1980).

> Virtually every institution mentioned here has come out of another century. Have there been any new institutions in the twentieth century? Universities, libraries, galleries, emerged in the medieval age; churches from before the medieval age, schools, business corporations, trade unions are all nineteenth century institutions. We regard ourselves as a very innovative, inventive society, but we haven't developed new institutions. Essentially, we're trying to make do, to make use of these old institutions in what we perceive to be a very different kind of world. (p. 162)

Closer to home in specifics, Sussman (1971) has commented: "The current methods of supporting and helping families have essentially failed" (p. 523). The basic reason he sets forward is that "professionalized service systems have attempted to reshape and fit families into moulds which have been cast by the professional. The consequence of this homogenized approach has been to stereotype and label families with problems. A further consequence is the little regard given to the differential aspirations, competencies and motivations of family members living in different types of structures and under various social, economic, and cultural constraints" (p. 523). Others have noted similar perspectives on the inadequacy of our helping systems (Levin, 1981; Morris, 1977; Rubenstein and Bloch, 1982; Strong-Boag, 1982; Spaulding and Balch, 1983).

In the field of parent education specifically, commentators have noted that "programs are of rather limited practicality and effectiveness" (Chilman, 1973, p. 458) and have been struck "by the paucity of the schemes; and by their almost total lack of coordination" (Pugh, 1981, p. 218).

But perhaps there are signs of hope in relation to the potentials inherent in the parent education movement. In the words of one text:

> . . . the potential of child care and parent education has been undermined, again in ways common to other institutions. But because child care and parent education are less institutionalized and rigid--despite their lengthy history--than are the public schools, juvenile reform institutions, and welfare system, the potential for new modes of responsibility are greater. Child Care and parent education can provide much needed services to parents. (. . . .) Parent education can be an antitote to the isolation of the private family by allowing parents to understand that their problems are general rather than individual (Grubb and Lazerson, 1982, p. 231).

A number of articles and books have addressed the issue of how to re-make services to families in a more appropriate and effective manner (Helfer, 1982; Howell, 1975; Kochman and Gaines, 1977; Rappoport et al., 1980). The designs to this point consist principally of sets of principles or guidelines for services and they tend to suggest remaking formal services more in the image of family functioning. Such principles as recognizing the full personhood of the parent, the balances within family life and between family life and other sectors, variety in family structure and culture, the place of substitute caregivers, no "right way" to parent, and parental growth and development are some of the key areas addressed by Rapoport et al. (1980).

Figure 2 outlines some of the dimensions of both family life and traditional social service provision, and attempts to etch the outline of two intermediary layers of interaction among persons and groups.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The far left column of Figure 2 outlines some key dimensions of traditional social services while the far right column sets out corresponding characteristics for families. It is the thesis of the author that the recent trend toward emphasis on "family support services" is actually the professionals' attempt to stretch the traditional functions of professional services in recognition of their inadequacies and in response to dissatisfactions expressed by consumers. A review of the history of professional attempts in this area leads one to greet this development with a twinge of skepticism or, as the French say: "plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose" ("the more things change, the more they remain the same").

It is suggested here that a movement beginning with families and moving toward the professional service system might offer a more promising route. The essential difference would be the design, development and control of these services (often, at this stage, best characterized as "groups") by parents, families and community/lay groups. For the lack of a better term at this point, this level of service is termed "para-familial". Current examples of this level are self-help or mutual-aid groups of various kinds The potential of this level for the development of new types of institutions is largely untapped, but is likely to receive increasing attention in the coming decade.

In concert with the development of new types of services (groups) more closely linked with the perceptions and needs as expressed by parents, a fundamental re-working of the traditional core elements of content presently characteristic of parent education offerings will need to be undertaken. In Figure 3, the left hand column sets out the traditional core elements of

parent education offerings based upon the author's review of the literature and a sample of current programs (Anglin, 1984 (a)). The right hand column

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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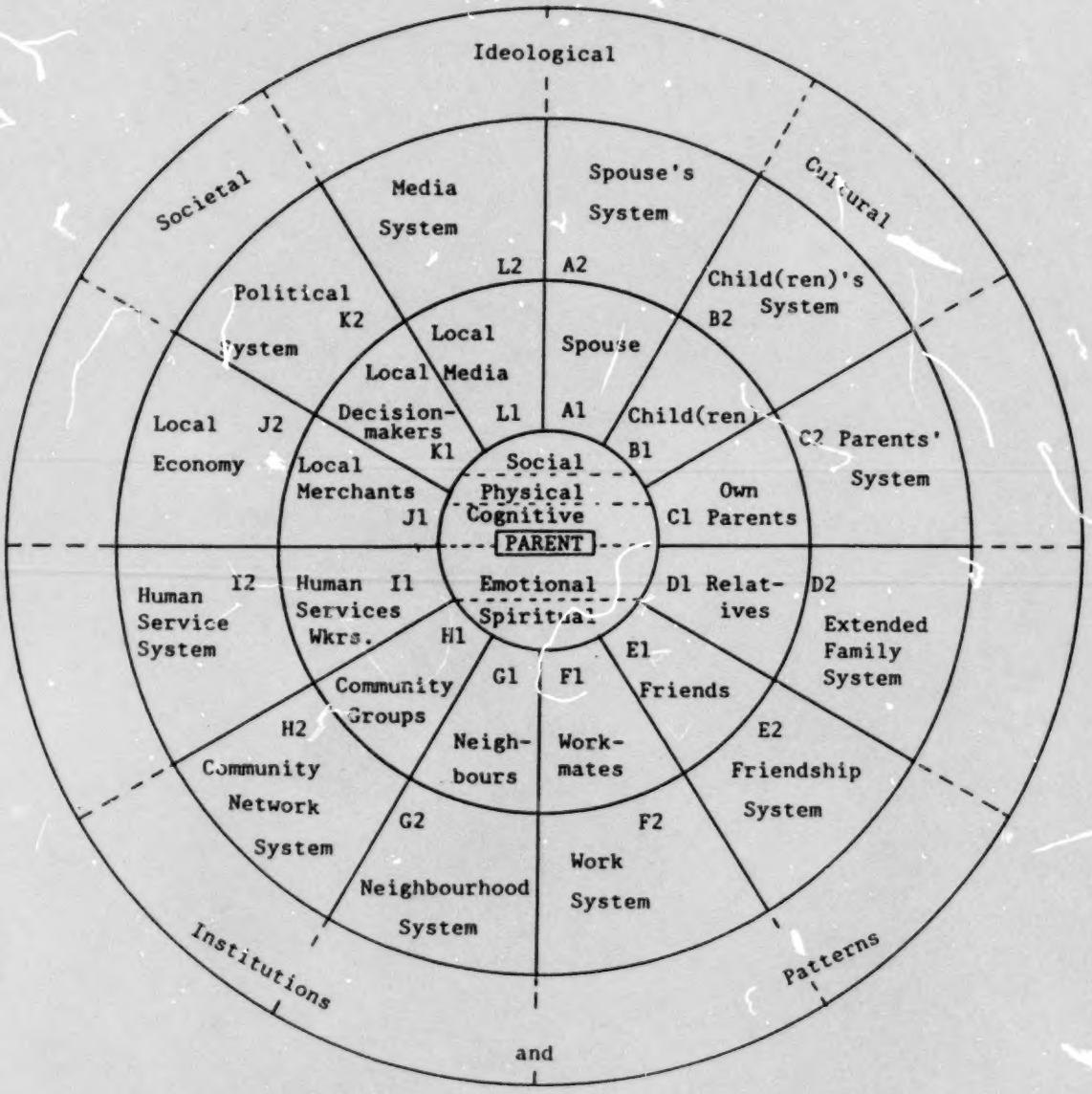
offers a re-conceptualization of the corresponding content which, it is suggested, encompasses a more ecologically-based and holistic framework for the design of parent education offerings. The developmental work necessary to translate this broader understanding of the nature of parent education into program materials and offerings has barely begun. It is hoped that the preliminary conceptualizations and frameworks offered in this paper will serve to clarify some of the transitions now underway and facilitate discussions and innovations in the field of parent education.

Figure 1

THE ECOLOGY OF PARENTAL FUNCTIONING



J.Anglin
April 1984

Figure 2

A Continuum of

Familial Institutions and Services

Social Services	Family Support Services	Para-familial groups/services	Families
formal	semi-formal	semi-informal	informal
categorical(narrow)	broadly categorical	quasi-universal	all members accepted
pathology oriented	problem oriented	concern oriented	normatively oriented
treatment/rehabilitative	preventive	supportive	developmental
governmental/centralized	agency/decentralized	community-based	home-based
professionalized	para-professional	para-familial	personalized
accountable to managers	accountable to consumers	accountable to families	mutual accountability
staff	staff/volunteers	friends/acquaintances	relatives
impersonal	network relationships	fellowship/friendship	intimacy
fragmented	coordinated	ecological	holistic

Figure 3

Transitions in Conceptualization and Content of Parent Education

From	To
child development	stages of parenthood and family development over the life cycle
communication with children	communication and problem-solving in family and adult life
changing (managing) children's behaviour	changing own behaviour, spousal relationship, and elements of the environment
family dynamics	the ecology of human development
ethics and values	the creation of meaning
use of social services	strengthening informal and formal support networks

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